

MINDFULNESS

As Buddhism has become more popular, it seems to have entered popular consciousness through psychology as a term of art: Mindfulness. John Kabat-Zinn has pioneered the use of the term in his Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction program, a very well researched use of mindfulness techniques as applied to stress and chronic pain. Marsha Linehan uses a variant of mindfulness in Dialectical Behavior Therapy. Cognitive psychology is now being paired with mindfulness in the treatment of ADHD and well being. And of course there are the less solemn spin-offs of what has become a fad; books on the Zen of everything from freeway driving to golf, which I am sure means that many ancient Zen masters are spinning in their graves.

It might be useful to take a look at what we're talking about when we use "mindfulness", since the term has a variety of meanings, and these meanings have implications. The Pali word is *sati*, which can be translated as "memory", "calling back to mind", "awareness", or "mindfulness". (PTS Pali-English Dictionary, Stede and Rhys Davids). As Jason Siff comments, "One form of these word (*sata*) means "being aware, conscious, attentive" while another form (*satimant*) means "thoughtful, contemplative, mindful".

The way in which one chooses to emphasize these various meanings can offer insight into the intentions or expectations behind meditation, the schools, both contemporary and historical, that are referenced by the particular usage, and even the underlying interpretations of what the Buddha's teachings are. For example, if mindfulness is understood as a useful technique in inducing relaxation and calm, then the reading of the

word would emphasize awareness that leads to quiescence as in the recollection of the object of awareness. This would usually be the breath, the body, or sometimes a mantra. The meditator constantly returns attention to the object in order to allocate attention to a simple, relatively unchanging object.

If *sati* is understood as component of inquiry into the nature of experience and of being, then the emphasis would be on “calling back to mind” where the meditator simply lets things come without using a technique, in order to gain insight into how experience comes into being, remains and dissipates. Here, a quiet mind may appear and disappear, but the object is not to still the mind but rather to see how intentionality and belief shape one’s ability to experience what is. Rather than stabilizing the mind in a calm and spacious state, one utilizes a degree of calm when it appears in order to provide a background with which to contrast the movements and patterns that arise. Think of it as a movie screen – it is a relatively featureless background with little or no information to offer. But without it the movie would be unseen; the characters, their dramas, the plot and the structure of the movie difficult if not impossible to make out. The dynamic that drives the production is called “dependent arising” and *sankhara* is the motor that provides the power.

The reason I feel that this is important to note is because these different applications of attention have very different results and sometimes are based on very different understandings of Buddhism. When confined to simple relaxation and its positive effects on health and well-being, the definition and use of mindfulness is not that important in the short term.

In the Zen tradition, it is called “*bompu zen*” or “ordinary zen”. It has been recognized since the time of early Chinese Buddhism as a way of

concentrating and controlling the mind in order to improve physical and mental well-being. It has no particular content or aim beyond health.

The goal of this kind of mindfulness is to reduce the reactive, reflexive responses to unpleasant experiences of physical, cognitive or emotional pain or distress. It is understood that the reactivity itself adds a level of distress that heightens the aversive quality of the initial stimuli. The mind is quieted by focusing on a particular mental object, usually the breath or the body.

When this concentration is interrupted, the meditator is instructed to note the interruption and its object, and in noting these phenomena to also notice the feeling state that is present with them. Feelings are described as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Once this noting has been done, one returns to the object of concentration.

Over time, the automatic nature of responses to unpleasant states is weakened, and an observing ego is established that can then return attention to non-stressful stimuli such as the breath or body. The effectiveness of this application of mindfulness in the treatment of chronic pain, stress and ADHD is well documented. This has become the standard reference in psychological literature when Buddhism and psychotherapy are combined.

Its association with health and contentment has probably created the popular impression that Buddhist practice is about the same, and that there is a one –to –one correlation between meditation and happiness. One risk here is that the practitioner who is experiencing neither is vulnerable to evaluating his or her practice as inadequate or incorrect, since there is no wider philosophical or intellectual context in which the practice rests.

In my opinion, *bompu* mindfulness is not a particularly Buddhist practice, and applying this kind of mindfulness to psychotherapy can never

go beyond the level of *bompu zen*. . It has obvious benefits, but it does not lead to liberation from suffering.

When the Buddha defined his teachings he referred to it as “Dharma”. We can paraphrase the word as “the nature of all things.” He was explicit about what dharma is: it is dependent arising. “When you see the Dharma, you see dependent arising; when you see dependent arising, you see the dharma.” There is no reference to dependent arising in the *bompu* kind of mindfulness, which among other things, means that the recognizable characteristics of Dharma are not accessible. Of these characteristics, the most relevant for our discussion are *akaaliko*, *ehipassiko*, and *opanaayiko*.

Ehipassiko means “inviting”: in examining experience there is a quality that appears that invites further inquiry. One becomes curious. This is not a likely feature of *bompu zen* because curiosity about experience will sooner or later be interrupted by the instruction to return to an object of awareness.

Opanaayiko means “onward leading”: curiosity is aided by an unfolding of experience that is not generated by intention, but is spontaneous and unpredictable. If we are practicing *bompu zen*, then we will never perceive the subtle, constant navigation to avoid unpleasant affect by shifting attention away from it. This navigation by its nature will prevent following any experience for very long, particularly if the experience is painful. So in a very subtle way, we are also cultivating attachment: in this case, the attachment to aversion to suffering.

This is the way we live our lives: an endless process of unconsciously steering ourselves around painful areas within ourselves. We may imagine that we are proceeding straight ahead, but in fact we are weaving a very complicated route around experiences we don’t like.

When we begin to meditate (*bompu zen* excepted) we begin to drop these evasions and encounter areas of ourselves we've become very skilled at evading. We start moving in straight lines, as it were. Then meditation practice becomes painful and difficult, and if we imagine that the point of meditation is to be calm, peaceful and serene, then we will evaluate these experiences as proof of our poor practice when in fact they are evidence of the opposite.

“The Perfect Way knows no difficulties, except that it refuses to pick and choose.” This is the essential statement of *saijojo zen*, and of *opanaayiko*.

Finally, *akaliko* refers to a quality of experience that is not dependent upon and therefore not constricted by conceptualization and conceptual constructs. In fact, it is a quality that allows you to see through categories that would otherwise be taken as absolute. So, for example, when the instruction given is to deal with thinking by labeling it “thinking, thinking”, I may be able to create enough internal distance to avoid getting completely caught up in thoughts, but I will also be uninterested in the experience of thinking itself.

The subtle aversive attitude encouraged by the instructions will lead me away from being “invited” by thinking to follow it, either as the development of themes or as the phenomenon of thought. It will therefore be likely to remain “just” thinking, a fixed, known event.

Because *bompu* mindfulness tends to work against the development of these qualities, it works against the examination of how experience is created and held on to (*upadana*) and sustained by the proliferation of concepts (*papanca*).

Since it can produce pleasant experience, you can see how it also can easily play into the dynamic created by a variable ratio reinforcement schedule. A blissful experience can easily lead to a craving for similar experiences and meditation can be hijacked by self-soothing. The craving for this experience will almost inevitably lead to a reification of it, so that the meditator now has it that the state he seeks exists in some way outside of his own processes, waiting for him to stumble back into it. Then meditation becomes a process of mapping and strategizing a return visit with the long term aim of taking up permanent residence. While this kind of mindfulness has been shown to be of great benefit for physical and emotional health, it is not likely to lead to liberation.

Mapping experience and producing desired outcomes seems to be an intuitively obvious thing to do. If it makes me happy and content, after all, why not learn how to do it all the time?

Consider the possibility that because of the brain's ordering and tracking functions in regard to regular and predictable patterns, we are hardwired to seek what in Sanskrit is called *atman*. The term refers to the eternal, unchanging constant that we unthinkingly assume lies behind the variability of sense experience. This union with the godhead is the goal of most spiritual systems (as well as of science—cf., a unified field theory), and both the path and goal to this are encoded in the simple practice itself.

Whether or not this tendency actually develops in the course of *bompu* meditation, it is always in the background. Because this approach never challenges it, it is never exposed or questioned. Buddhist practice then can appear to be perfectly reasonable and – exotic trappings aside – familiar.

The Buddha is understood to be a cooler version of God. I don't think it's accurate to say it's intuitively familiar just to Westerners; this is an

assumption that most everybody makes without expending any effort at all in coming to. In other words, it is intuitively obvious. I suspect that it is this kind of mindfulness and view that Western psychology has adopted as its definition of Buddhism and Buddhist psychology. It's easy to understand.

Mindfulness as “calling back to mind” or recollecting experience however is based on a very different and very difficult perspective. This kind of mindfulness is called “*saijojo*” in Zen, and is the practice of liberation. This is a path with no goal, or a path whose goal is the path itself. The “no-path” path. It means constantly confronting how we create beliefs and goals with no conscious intention of doing so. To my mind, this is the deconstruction of samsara, and is a long and difficult practice that provides no end in sight. Here, mindfulness entails coming to know the sankharas and how they create karma, which is fixated in habits and modes of being. This is the practice that cultivates knowledge of intentions and the states of consciousness from which they arise, and which they then perpetuate. It offers no stable foothold, because a foothold inevitably becomes a “thing” that we will turn to for reassurance that there is something, somewhere, that we can find and remember; a compass that will always point to true north.

Seeing patterns includes seeing feelings, emotions, the narrative that usually accompanies experience, and from time to time, the covert intentions that create expectations and longings that lead to frustration and suffering when these expectations are unmet. It may also entail seeing how one's personal narrative influences subtle states of mind.

Once while meditating I watched my mind move from long trains of thought to shorter, more random thoughts, to a kind of pre-thought where images and thoughts were not yet formed, to a peaceful calm state of mind.

In that calm state of mind a feeling of happiness and bliss arose and I felt as if I were being gently carried off into a current of a jhana, or absorption.

Then it abruptly ended, and my mind went back to its previously busy state. After meditation I recollected that experience and wondered what had happened to interrupt the absorption. In examining my memory of that moment I saw that doubt had stopped it. This was not doubt about the veracity of the experience itself. Rather within that doubt a very complicated and subtle personal narrative had unfolded: I had experienced or interpreted (same thing) the developing bliss as an invitation to be held and carried. With that arose a self who had been abandoned before, and was certain of a repetitive trauma. The immediate reflex was to generate suspicion and a refusal to trust. The feeling was more or less “why should I trust you? You dropped me before.”

This may appear to be very compatible with the cultivation of insight that psychotherapy (especially object relations) offers, with one notable exception: This is a mindfulness that looks in places we never think to look, places where the self-structure arises and disappears in tandem with experiences that arise and disappear. This is the insight into insight itself, which like the orobouros eats itself. This is conveyed in a parable of the Buddha's:

Bhikkhus, I shall show you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, and not for the purpose of grasping. Listen and attend closely to what I shall say.” “Yes, venerable sir,” the Bhikkhus replied. The Blessed One said thus: “Bhikkhus, suppose a man in the course of a journey saw a great expanse of water, whose near shore was dangerous and fearful

and whose further shore was safe and free from fear, but there was no ferryboat or bridge going to the far shore.

Then he thought, “There is this great expanse of water, whose near shore is dangerous and fearful and whose further shore is safe and free from fear, but there is no ferryboat or bridge going to the far shore. Suppose I collect grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bind them together into a raft, and suppose by the raft and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore.” And then the man collected grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bound them together into raft, and suppose by the raft and making an effort with his hands and feet, he got safely across to the far shore. Then, when he had got across and had arrived at the far shore, he might think thus:

‘This raft has been very helpful to me, since supported by it and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore. Suppose I were to hoist it on my head or load it on my shoulder, and then go wherever I want.’ Now, bhikkhus, what do you think? By doing so, would that man be doing what should be done with that raft?”

“No, venerable sir.”

“By doing what would that man be doing what should be done with that raft? Here, bhikkhus, when that man got across and had arrived at the far shore, he might think thus: ‘This raft has been very helpful to me, since supported by it and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore. Suppose I were to haul it onto the dry land or set it adrift in the water, and then go wherever I want.’ Now, bhikkhus, it is by so

doing that that man would be doing what should be done with that raft. So I have shown you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping.

‘Bhikkhus, when you know the Dhamma to be similar to a raft, you should abandon even good states, how much more so bad states.’”

Belief of *any kind* is the chief obstacle to receptivity – and chief among them, the belief in *atman*-- which is why he begins with the caution that this is for the purpose of liberation from all the fixations, not the creation of a new and even more gratifying, extraordinary belief system. The dangerous expanse of water is the expanse of our lives within the confines of an unpredictable, changeable world; the near shore, our beliefs and expectations whatever they may be (including those of liberation), and the far shore an as-yet unknown way of being free from all intentions and fixations.

There is no ferryboat or bridge because there is no one else who can deliver us from this existential condition. We can only use what is at hand, our own capacity to recollect, to apperceive our own perceptual processes and to cultivate wisdom. Having developed that capacity, we must then relinquish it. To hold on to a way of doing is the same as hauling a raft around when it is no longer relevant to anything. This is pretty obvious when we confront bad states. It is less obvious then we experience good ones. In either case, the experience is likely to generate questions of “how

did I get here? What were the steps, and how can I repeat them to get here (or avoid getting here) again?”

This can be called “Right View”, the governing variable that guides all the other variables such as right effort, right speech and so on. We can say that “right view” is the view that all views are temporary and conditional, to be abandoned when they become objects to be held on to.